

PEER-LED TEAM LEARNING THE EXPERIENCE OF LEADING

MY EXPERIENCE AS A PEER LEADER: HINDSIGHT, INSIGHT

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Some of my favorite memories over the last four years at The City College of New York of the City University of New York were not of me at a desk, listening intently about the mysteries of the known universe. Rather, my finest memories involved me in a workshop, at a chalkboard, using wit and comedic humor to clarify a topic that was introduced by a 'boring' professor not more than an hour prior.

I decided to join the Peer-Led Team Learning (PLTL) program as a sophomore and stayed until I was a senior (yes, for summer sessions too) and I would do it again if asked. Why? Because by becoming a Peer Leader it served as an outlet for me to take my personality and infuse it into a classroom setting. It provided a challenge of uncertainty like none other posed before. And it has rewarded me with the accomplishment and satisfaction of helping my peers.

The fact that one may be 'book-smart' is not enough; the ability to communicate and relate abstract topics is a must. Take for instance, the concept of chemical equilibrium, and the fact that all chemical reactions strive for a state of stability, such that the reaction no longer requires nor exerts energy. This is a fairly fundamental concept in chemistry; however, it is a fairly daunting concept to students. Therefore, an effective Workshop Leader must be able to introduce an abstract topic such as chemical equilibrium in terms that are relatable to students. An anecdote that I grew fond of, especially during review sessions for exams is the "Wile E. Coyote" example. Infamous from 'Looney Toons' cartoons for his ongoing attempt to capture the "Road Runner," the story calls for a boulder rolled from a cliff into a 'U' shaped cavern in an attempt to squish the "Road Runner" as he travels on the road below. The road at the base of this cavern is, in a sense, equilibrium and the boulder is the chemical reaction in question. When pushed, the boulder would sway back and forth repeatedly along the walls of the cavern below, overshooting and undershooting the central point until it inevitably comes to a rest at equilibrium, unless of course, an external force is introduced either by the products or the reactants. Thus, students understood the concept using a classic childhood cartoon scenario which perfectly explained the concept of equilibrium in a chemical reaction.

As a Workshop Leader you are helping your peers gain a better grasp of the subject material, but in turn it is the Workshop Leader who is also immersed in a learning experience, which encompasses the methods of how students learn, the ways they retain knowledge and the most effective means of keeping a group engaged in the subject matter. The theories of Lev Vygotsky and William Perry become evident and tangible within each workshop group. In addition, the learning experience continues with the subject material as well: the depth of the material presented to your peers becomes much more apparent, and the age-old adage 'You never fully understand a topic until you teach it' is the truth. Whether you are studying for the DATs to be a

dentist, the OATs to become an optometrist, the MCATs to get into med school, or the GREs for graduate school, the reinforcement that being a Workshop Leader provides is invaluable.

However, it would be naïve to think that the role of a Workshop Leader does not have its negative aspects. If you are to be a Peer Leader you must adjust and react with your students... Rarely, if ever, will you run into the ideal workshop, a group of bright-eyed, enthusiastic geniuses who are 'A'- bound with or without you. Instead there will always be a recalcitrant few, those who won't do their homework or other assignments, and others who maintain their distance from the rest of the group altogether. However, these are the few that a Workshop Leader must focus on. In fact, a particular student comes to mind from several semesters ago. She was a very bright and obviously intelligent young woman whose biggest academic flaw was her apathy. She simply did not care for the subject matter, the professor, or the course in general. For many weeks I attempted to incorporate her into the workshop sessions but it was admittedly difficult. Through my various tenuous efforts she slowly began to contribute to the workshops and in turn paid attention to the subject matter itself. In that semester I truly believed that by sheer tenacity and cooperation I turned a potentially failing student around for the better. It is for this minority, in part, that the role of a Workshop Leader exists, to cater to those who otherwise are not motivated to keep pace with the professors on their own. For the few who need study tips, pacing, and enthusiasm, you are free to create support in the manner you see fit.

Nevertheless, my experiences as a Workshop Leader and Coordinator (a more administrative position held by experienced Peer Leaders) are something that I am truly grateful for. I have spent a large portion of my undergraduate career in this role and it has come to define my memory of the last four years. I have had an invaluable opportunity to make many contributions and I would readily recommend to any student to serve as a Peer Leader.

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